



Testimony of David DeVaughn MPA, Manager, Policy and Government Relations  
Albany, NY Public Hearing-May 13, 2015 – National Commission on Hunger

Good afternoon Chairpersons Chilton and Doar, and members of the National Hunger Commission. Thank you for holding this hearing today. My name is David DeVaughn and I am the Manager of Policy and Government Relations for **City Harvest**. I would like to speak with you about the landscape of hunger and food insecurity in New York City, as well as the need for a strong Child Nutrition Reauthorization that ensures that more students get access to healthy school meals.

**City Harvest** is the world's first and New York City's only food rescue organization. For more than 32 years, **City Harvest** has rescued food from all segments of the food industry that would otherwise go to waste and distributed it to soup kitchens and food pantries across New York City to feed hungry New Yorkers. This includes restaurants, farmers markets, grocery stores, Hunts Point, and corporations and businesses within the five boroughs. We will rescue 50 million pounds of good food this year and deliver it free of charge to more than 500 community food programs. 75% of this food will be nutrient-dense, including produce, dairy, and meat.

**City Harvest** is New York City's largest provider of free produce to New Yorkers in need. Our organization is charged with ensuring that families not only have food on the table, but the *right type* of food to ensure they remain healthy, and live sustainable lives. Often access to fresh fruits and vegetables is extremely limited and prohibitively expensive in communities with the greatest need. **City Harvest** takes a long-term approach to fighting hunger by partnering with residents, local organizations, and businesses through *Healthy Neighborhoods* programs which increase the availability of affordable fruits and vegetables in low-income communities and provide the nutrition education and resources to encourage wholesome meal choices.

### **Hunger and Food Insecurity in New York City**

For many families, the question isn't *what* to have for dinner, but *am* I going to have dinner. Nearly 1.4 million New Yorkers struggle with food insecurity, and nearly 1 in 4 children. Many have to turn to the emergency food network. Many more don't have access to affordable, high-quality food where they live.

With the Women’s Center on Educational and Career Advancement, **City Harvest** released the 2014 Self-Sufficiency Standard Report in December 2014. The Self-Sufficiency Standard measures the household income necessary to meet very basic needs in New York City without any public or private support. The Standard is a more nuanced and accurate measure than the Federal Poverty Level for understanding income inequality because it takes into account where a family lives, how many people are in the household, and the number and ages of children.

**42%—nearly half—of New York City households (2.7 million men, women and children) lack the income needed to cover basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and healthcare.**<sup>1</sup> New York City has an income inadequacy rate that is higher than that of Mississippi (which has consistently had the highest poverty rates in the country). The self-sufficiency gap, or the disconnect between how much a family needs to meet their basic needs and where public assistance starts, is growing. On average, the amount of income that a family needs to meet their basic needs grew by 45% since 2000.

Households are juggling fixed costs like housing and childcare, but food is an elastic expense. Families skimp on meals and skip meals to save money. The cost of living is outpacing wage growth: **food costs have increased by 59% since 2000**, while median earnings of working adults have increased only 17% during the same period. A staggering 83% of households below the Self-Sufficiency Standard have one or more workers. Similarly, many residents that are forced to turn to soup kitchens and food pantries are also working but are still unable to make ends meet.

**Our network of soup kitchens and food pantries has seen a 43% increase in visits since 2008, indicating how many families need help to consistently put food on the table.** Between 2008 and 2014 visits to our network of community food programs increased by 43%. Since 2008:

- Visits in the Bronx increased 76%.
- Visits in Staten Island increased 53%.
- Visits in Brooklyn increased 40%.
- Visits in Queens increased 39%.

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<sup>1</sup> Pearce, DM. Overlooked and Undercounted: Struggling to make ends meet in New York City. University of Washington, School of Social Work, Center for Women’s Welfare. 2014.

While helping to meet immediate needs across the city, **City Harvest** recognizes that ending hunger in particularly hard-hit communities requires a deeper investment. Our geographically focused approach to fighting hunger, *Healthy Neighborhoods*, works in low-income areas with neighborhood partners to increase the availability of and demand for affordable, healthy food. Through our Healthy Neighborhoods programs, **City Harvest** partners with residents, community organizations, afterschool programs, and local businesses. Together we work to achieve a long-term impact in the fight against hunger by engaging residents in enhancing the community food landscape.

In addition to the efforts made by **City Harvest** and our anti-hunger partners, there are integral policies at the Federal level that must be enhanced and protected to help Americans who have difficulty affording sufficient healthy food for themselves and their families.

### **Child Nutrition Reauthorization**

As you are well aware, the current Child Nutrition Act, the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010* expires on September 30, 2015. For the first time in our country, more than half the students attending public schools qualify for a free or reduced price lunch. This figure is 75% in New York City. In New York State alone, over 1.8 million children eat school lunch every day, and nearly half of those meals are eaten in NYC public schools. These meals serve as a stopgap measure preventing millions of our children from going hungry by providing nutritious meals. During this reauthorization, we must work to protect these programs from those aiming to soften the current nutrition standards and limit access to children in need.

**City Harvest** is leading an action campaign for New Yorkers to engage in this debate, called the New York City Alliance for Child Nutrition Reauthorization or NYC4CNR. This diverse group of stakeholders is finalizing a platform for the 2015 reauthorization and plans to hold events with elected officials and advocates, specific to New York City, that inform advocacy with local and national partners. In addition, **City Harvest** launched *Feed Our Kids*, a public awareness campaign to help increase access to healthy food where our children live, learn, and play. This campaign provides the public a way to tell Congress to pass strong legislation that protects these programs.

We urge the Commission to support a strong Child Nutrition Act that will ensure healthy NYC children who are not hungry, well-nourished, and ready to learn, while strengthening local economies and communities.

### **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**

The recent House and Senate Conference Committee joint budget resolution, and subsequent budgeted amounts passed along to Agriculture Appropriations Committee, assume significant cuts to their programs. These programs include SNAP. While the budget amounts did not suggest specific policy areas or programs to cut, we know that SNAP is on the chopping block. As a result of the SNAP cuts of November 2013, nearly two million New Yorkers saw a cut in their monthly benefits by an average of \$30-\$50 per household. Further reducing resources for individuals and families struggling with hunger is not just bad policy, it also hurts small businesses all over the country.

### **Conclusion**

I ask that the Commission prioritize programs and funding to ensure that New Yorkers have the resources to put food on their tables, and when that is not enough, that soup kitchens and food pantries have the food they need to feed the growing numbers of families, children, and elderly that are forced to turn to them.

Again, thank you for your attention to these urgent matters and for all your work on to improve the lives and conditions of low-income New Yorkers.

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